



A woman from the mountain town of Arsiero learns the leather plaiting technique, intrecciato, that Bottega Veneta traditionally uses in its handbags.

CREDIT: REGIONAL GOVERNMENT OF VENETO.

Close to home

Luxury leathersgoods brands are flying high, but they need to keep paying attention to how their products are made and not just what they look like on the catwalk. Bottega Veneta is achieving a good balance between the two. Growing impressively across the global market, the company is staying unfailingly faithful to its roots in the Veneto region of northern Italy.

Luxury leathersgoods brand Bottega Veneta is part of the big-hitting LPPR Group, which means it's part of a corporate landscape that involves reporting results regularly and taking part in rounds of interviews with the financial media in which its chief executive, Marco Bizzarri, is encouraged to adopt the same 'beat-the-Street' demeanour as his peers in Paris, London, New York, Hong Kong and Tokyo. This is part of twenty-first century life and owes much to the impact of brand-building and marketing on commercial success these days.

Much of the time, however, Mr Bizzarri

lives and works in Vicenza in the Veneto region of northern Italy, well away from the spotlight. It is just 20 kilometres from the famous Arzignano leather cluster with its tanneries (big and small) and producers of machinery, technology and leather chemicals for them—and tanneries all over the world—to use; Vicenza is the provincial capital. It's true that the leather produced in Arzignano is less associated with luxury leathersgoods than the material supplied by rival Tuscan cluster Santa Croce sull'Arno, but leather is still very much part of the fabric of Vicenza and the surrounding communities. This is a very

different world and you cannot help but wonder which is real life and which is just fantasy for Bottega Veneta?

Grand re-opening

This is not an easy question to answer. Marco Bizzarri is a regular visitor to the 150 or so stores the company owns and runs around the world and is used to life in the fast lane. For example, in April 2011, he was a central figure at the grand re-opening of the flagship Bottega Veneta store in Sloane Street, London, but many of the statements he made to the London business and fashion press during his stay



harked back to the company's home city, province and region, to its traditions and to its commitment to quality, to understated luxury and to 'Made in Italy'.

He talked about a project that the leathergoods brand became involved in, in January, after it reached an agreement with the Veneto region to set up a co-operative in Arsiero, a mountain town north of Vicenza, to retrain 30 skilled gold jewellers, mostly women, to become leathergoods artisans. Ten years ago, there were more than 1,000 gold jewellery manufacturers in the province of Vicenza, but more than half have closed down costing many jobs. Bottega Veneta has agreed to work in partnership with the Veneto authorities to teach these skilled workers the secrets of the leather plaiting or braiding technique, known locally as *intrecciato*, that goes into its trademark handbags. Local politician Francesco Munarini said, when the co-operative opened: "When we first talked about this initiative few people thought it would become a reality, I think because we've just become so used to the idea that there is no work for women in communities like ours. We were absolutely amazed at the number of women who came forward seeking to learn the skills required to make luxury leathergoods. We've heard there is even a chance of opening up a second co-operative nearby."

Finding new skilled workers close to home will also help Bottega Veneta meet increasing demand for its luxury bags. It achieved revenues of €510.6 million in 2010, up by 27% compared to 2009. Pre-tax profit on this total was up by 45% to €133 million. The company has 16 stores in China now and is expanding its existing stores in key US cities such as Chicago and San Francisco. Growth at these levels is exciting for everyone involved, but Bottega Veneta wants to meet the extra demand

without having to contemplate making its products in a new location. During his trip to London Mr Bizzarri told the *Financial Times*: "Made in Italy is an absolute must for us. Our customers expect it." Not that Bottega Veneta bags carry 'Made in Italy' labels. They famously don't even carry Bottega Veneta labels; the company believes the look and the quality of its products speak for themselves.

There was a time, in the late 1980s and very early 1990s, when the Vicenza



The Bottega Veneta store in Paris. CREDIT: CARLAV82/WIKIPEDIA



company found itself sucked into the loud game of grabbing consumers' attention with big logos. It didn't work. By 1991, financial difficulties had forced the sale of the brand to the Gucci Group, which in turn became part of PPR in 2003. Current Bottega Veneta creative director, Tomas Maier, joined the company at the time of the sale to Gucci and quickly insisted on a return to intrecciato and the label-free look that earned the brand fame originally.

Long day's journey into night

One of the reasons this is interesting is that Mr Maier is German rather than Italian and is not based in Vicenza, but divides his time among studios in New York, Miami and Milan. His recent activities include creating a short film on the subject of travel, made in collaboration with photographer and director, Christian Weber. The film, entitled 'Viaggio Notturmo', is the centrepiece of a new travel-themed digital campaign for the luxury goods brand, focusing attention on Bottega Veneta's array of leather luggage sets and travel accessories.

'Viaggio Notturmo' is a meditation on luxury travel and the possibilities it engenders. It follows two individuals, a man and a woman, in the suite of an elegant hotel. Whether they are in the same space at the same time is unclear.

What is clear is simply and evocatively the allure and romance of the journey. Shot in New York City in February, 'Viaggio Notturmo' is a departure for Bottega Veneta, whose promotional videos up till now have focused on the artisanal techniques and collaborative processes that define the brand.

"Travel is an inherently fascinating subject because it's so personal," said Mr Maier on announcing the new film. "We all travel, but each of us brings intensely individual hopes and concerns to the experience. When the idea of making a film came up, I wanted to show not just the practical side of travel — the luggage, the eye mask — but also what is surreal, romantic, and potentially transformative about a voyage. I like that Christian's work is simultaneously precise and mysterious. He has managed to convey what is shared while leaving room for each of us to project our own imaginations onto the story."

Personality of leather

Quite how much this sentiment would resonate with tannery workers in Santa Croce or Arzignano or the newly skilled intrecciato women of Arsiero is anyone's guess, but it does not mean a departure from the values Bottega Veneta is so proud of. Tomas Maier himself said in a recent interview with German newspaper

No names, no logos. The materials and the craftsmanship in Bottega Veneta handbags speak for themselves.

CREDIT: BOTTEGA VENETA

Süddeutsche Zeitung that he deplored mainstream fashion's habit of copying catwalk designs; he called it "the most ridiculous thing". Instead, he is a champion of extravagance, confidence and individuality. This last quality is one that leather lends itself to very well. The creative director talked of leather bags taking on the personality of their owners, pointing to the lasting appeal of luxurious, carefully crafted leather goods.

This is why Marco Bizzarri believes buyers of flashier bags with prominent logos and designs that are of the moment will, in some cases, refine their tastes and in time become Bottega Veneta customers. Especially in China and other developing markets, there may be an initial desire to flaunt wealth with ostentatious displays of big brands' logos and names. As people become more accustomed to their own wealth, however, they often seem satisfied to leave some things unsaid and to let quality and craftsmanship do the talking. He thinks this is where his brand can come in. ●